



Reform and Revolution

The Arab Spring at One Year

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Staff Writer

Abstract

This paper concerns the differences in the development of the Algerian and Egyptian uprisings within the context of the Arab Spring revolts.

Keywords: *Arab Spring, Algeria, Egypt, revolution*



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The image of Arab youth engaged in riotous protests is not an uncommon one to an American observer. After the second half of the past century brought an endless stream of images and reports on the recurring civil unrest across the Middle East and North Africa, the spectator has been nearly desensitized to chaos in the region. That, coupled with ignorance towards political differences amongst the nations of the Arab world, has led to the blanket term “Arab Spring” to generalize the diverse upheavals occurring since January 2011. This broad moniker fails to address the various political tactics that defined the distinct movements. Furthermore, the media coverage focused only on the violence of conflicts in nations, namely Egypt and Tunisia, and disregarded the more reform-based struggles in Algeria, Oman, and Morocco. Spectators may observe these two natures of conflict best in the Algerian and Egyptian upheavals, where contrasting political histories and governmental reprisals provide the variables in the distinct conflict resolutions. A year has now passed since the first uprisings; these conflicts deserve their own examinations to understand better their impact on Arab politics.

Fraught with deep divisions between religious and secular, and urban and rural demographics, the history of Algeria and Egypt stems from similar post-colonial pasts. The maintenance of these states’ unity in the face of such social tug-of-war has defined their history since independence. The largely autocratic political structures, which played the antagonists in the media coverage of the recent Arab Spring, have extended throughout the nations’ recent memories. The difference in these two uprisings can

only be analyzed when considering the differences in the two nations’ histories since the end of the Cold War.

The now famous Egyptian Uprising began long before Twitter, Facebook, or any of the most recent participants were born. The principal actor, Hosni Mubarak, became president in 1981, inheriting a legacy of autocratic secular control begun by the Arab Nationalist and socialist Gamal Abdel Nasser. Mubarak followed after Nasser’s successor, Anwar Sadat, and preserved the nation’s precarious secularism against the Islamism of the increasingly popular Muslim Brotherhood. The organization, founded in 1928, appealed heavily to the religious working class constituting a populous demographic in the nation, despite its official illegality.¹ This position put Mubarak in even more favorable standing with the United States in its war on terror against Islamist organizations in the area. The friendship would prove highly unpopular, though, with the numerous opponents of U.S. interventionism in the Arab world. Despite this, the significant U.S. funding for the Egyptian military outweighed the threat of civil unpopularity, playing a key role in the future post-Mubarak government.² To protect his position against this popular movement, he maintained the state’s practice of stringent limits on free assembly and speech and continued election cycles that carried no faith in the international community.³

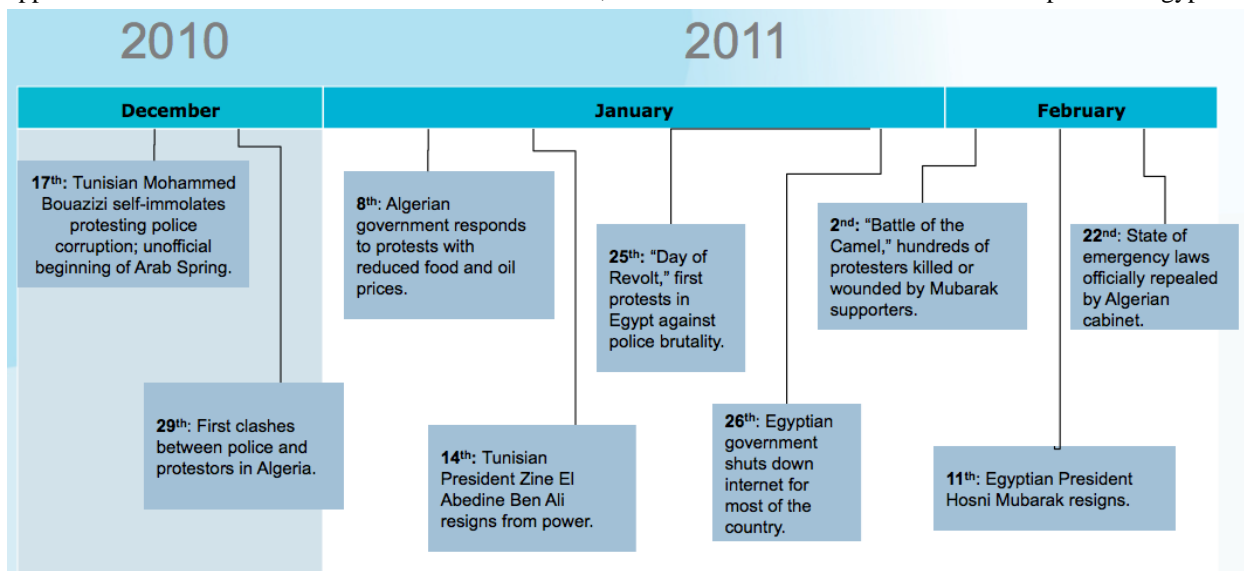
Mubarak’s relative ambivalence toward Israel along with the Palestinian sovereignty movement that inundated the northern part of the nation with Gazan refugees weighed heavily on the minds of the religious demographic.⁴ His “Cold Peace” with Israel, so decried by Arab Nationalists and Islamists alike, smacked of Realpolitik and betrayed the will of the Palestinian-sympathetic populace. These policies alienated his position from both the liberal urban youth for their blatant violation of democratic liberties, and the religious working class for their refusal to recognize the Muslim Brotherhood’s interests.⁵ This demographic dichotomy would prove crucial to the development and aftermath of the Egyptian Revolution.

The background of the contrasting Algerian uprising bears striking similarities with its Egyptian counterpart. A recent memory of extreme violence in Algeria absent in modern Egyptian history, however, contributed significantly to the relative peacefulness of the Algerian movement. The roots extend to 1991, when a turbulent political past erupted into a vicious civil war across the nation. This civil war broke out when the Islamic National Front, an Islamist political party, ascended the majority in the national government. The military, typically a lonely force for secular power in Arab nations, deposed the Islamist government and imposed strict “state of emergency laws” which restricted freedom of assembly and political participation. The coup led Islamist groups to a civil war against the government; over ten years, this resulted in over 150,000 deaths and the collapse of the constitutional government.⁶ Despite the signing of an armistice in 2002 which ended the civil war, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the militarily-appointed leader, retains his political position. Moreover, the state of emergency laws lasted long past the ceasefire, and their maintenance within Algerian social life would provide the recent movement with its most concrete objective. Given the inequitable distribution of violence between both Algeria and Egypt, the first factor in the variance of conflict resolution appears.

In both Algeria and Egypt, overcoming the tenuous relationship between state and population appeared insurmountable until December of 2010,

when the “Arab Spring” would first arise. Despite the broad narrative of international media coverage, the upheavals that would encompass the Arab Spring began not as a heroic standoff between the forces of democracy and autocracy, or between the young “Tweeters” and the old regime. Rather, it was the constant struggle for reasonable food prices and better employment opportunities that first mobilized the activists in the testing grounds of the revolution.⁷ Sharing in the economic crisis which the United States and countless other nations experienced, the Tunisian demonstrators demanded economic concessions like price-ceilings and subsidies. Yet, it would be the government and not the protesters that would provide the necessary ingredient for a successful rebellion—martyrs. Specifically, activists like Mohammed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation in the face of police corruption would grant him the posthumous title “Martyr of the Middle Eastern Revolutions”.⁸

The violent response of the Tunisian police and security personnel to otherwise peaceful reform-based demonstrations launched the movement directly at the basis of the nation’s authoritarian government. This experiment identified the severity of the government response to political movements as the defining factor in each of the Arab Spring revolts. This trend rang particularly true for the Egyptian and Algerian revolutions. To contrast these governmental responses, it would be best to begin chronologically, and to understand the ineffective response in Egypt and



then the relatively effective response in Algeria.

With the ouster of Tunisian President Ben Ali on January 14 after two months of protest, the people of North Africa could begin to realize their collective strength in the process of reformation. Only a week later on January 25, the Egyptians began the mass demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square against rampant unemployment, political repression, and corruption.⁹ Counteracting the organizers of the demonstrations, the Mubarak government established a national block on all Internet access to hinder the flow of information. This shortsighted tactic was a significant mistake made by Mubarak. The comprehensive silencing of activists would provoke a common narrative against governmental repression, and garnered international sympathy from the social media so accessible to global spectators.¹⁰

At this point, the Egyptian Revolution took on its distinctive and historically significant character, becoming a spontaneous social movement led not by a "vanguard party" but rather by a general dissatisfaction with the political structure. The presence of mass political assembly challenged the notion of police enforcement of the anti-assembly restrictions. This populous, free-flowing movement gained strength with every attack, restriction, and martyr provided by the political establishment. By February, the Mubarak regime realized that the consequences of the Tunisian Revolution had evolved into a regional crisis. The regime offered concessions, namely the formation of a new government and the pledge to hold open election within the next cycle. As the number of concessions increased, so did the radicalization of marginalized students, lawyers, labor unionists, Christians, Islamists and countless others that constituted the movement, leading to demonstrations of over 50,000 across the nation per day.⁹ With the mounting grievances of demonstrators, reform no longer proved to be a possibility. Instead, protesters adopted the chant initiated by their Tunisian comrades: *Ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizam*, or in English, "The people want the fall of the regime".¹²

Just as every demographic on the political spectrum fully invested itself in the movement, so too did the formerly loyalist force of the Egyptian military, which abandoned its foundering president when faced with the possibility of international censure. More beholden to its financial suppliers, primarily the United States, with over \$1.3 billion in direct military aid, than to its tenuously associated president, the military began to openly oppose orders to use live ammunition against demonstrators.¹³ Without this foundation of autocratic authority, the only forces left to oppose the revolution were the armed militias that continued to support the Mubarak regime. In what would famously be dubbed the "Battle of the Camel", mounted militias assaulted demonstrators gathered in Cairo, killing several people and instigating the first instance of large-scale intra-state violence in recent Egyptian memory.

Within a month, the wave of discontent proved unstoppable. Under popular and military pressure, President Mubarak cut short his twenty-year term and resigned, leaving the country with succession dilemmas that have yet to be solved. Eleven days later on February 22, in response to building pressure in his country, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria announced from a much more secure position that the state of emergency laws which had curtailed civil rights would finally be terminated.¹⁴ After very few deaths and this legal retraction secured, the demonstrators ceased major violent activity, accepted their equally authoritarian president, and went home victorious in destroying a tool for state repression. When compared to its volatile neighbor to the east, one must ask, why were outcomes different?

There is a reason that Algeria has gotten nearly no media coverage in the United States while Egypt came to the forefront in the minds of Americans. No political figurehead was toppled, no violent clashes were instigated, and most importantly, no government was overthrown in Algeria. Despite the ubiquity of radical revolutions across North Africa and the primacy of violence in Algeria's political history, the story of the Algerian uprising was one of compromised reform and top-down moderation.

The beginnings of Algerian public demonstrations occurred simultaneously with the publicized protests of neighboring Tunisians. It mirrored the grievances over unemployment and food prices, and continued to grow after the Tunisian president vacated from power.¹⁵ With more foresight than his Egyptian counter-part, President Bouteflika recognized the threat such momentum could pose to his regime. Rather than simply ignoring or instantly repressing the demands of the illegally assembling students and trade unionists, early on Bouteflika presented concessions to the more economical demands of the developing movement. On January 8, before Tunisia would become an example for the reform movement, President Bouteflika announced sharp cuts in the taxes on basic foodstuffs, sating the hunger of protesters who would contribute to a potential uprising.¹⁶

This gesture, though seemingly insignificant considering the legitimacy of broader grievances, played a crucial role in the peaceful outcome of the upheaval. The response by Bouteflika demonstrated something more than just a handout; rather, it illustrated the bilateral process necessary for reform. The regime responded to the public gathering not with outright violence, but with a concession, showing that the government gave significant consideration to the will of the people. Moreover, the government made every effort to successfully refrain from making any martyrs for the demonstrators' cause.¹⁷ In essence, the Algerian government saw the protesters not as an inherently hostile force, but rather as a democratic voice with which to contend.

The Algerian government's final decision to repeal the state of emergency laws, though scantily publicized, proved a historic moment in North Africa equal to the fall of Mubarak. It proved the possibility of popular resistance to authoritarian pressure and political action for public demands. Though this side of the broad term "Arab Spring" is rarely publicized, it shows a successful, non-violent path for future popular Arab struggles. Without this study of authoritarian reactions and their effects, spectators can learn nothing about the Arab Spring and mass direct action as a whole.

Author

SIMON BROWN of Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania is currently a University of Pittsburgh freshman and first-time contributor to the Pitt Political Review. He is a history and philosophy major, with a particular interest in current events in the Arab region.

Notes

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